10 BETWEEN PEOPLE AND POWER: NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Campaign groups aim to exert influence. Although their objectives and ways of working may vary, commonly they aim to focus the spotlight on their chosen topics. They usually claim to be acting in the public interest, to hold up issues for public scrutiny and to provide a broader input into decision-making processes. But, says **Jack Stilgoe**, growing trends for more consultative public engagement have significant implications for NGOs, which may have this element of their work undermined. It is time, he suggests, that they also reassessed their relationship with the public.

Thirty years ago, a previously obscure American interest group turned its attention towards the UK. The first oil crisis had left Britain's energy industry in turmoil. Among those clamouring for attention and expansion was the nuclear industry. But Friends of the Earth had other ideas. Their campaign began as a small environmental pressure group, but broadened its base by mobilising citizens to take action. Backed up by others in the environmental movement, this interest group opened up the debate about nuclear power by highlighting a new set of economic and environmental costs. In the words of one campaigner at the time, Friends of the Earth "turned nuclear power into a problem".

In a sense, public engagement is what all NGOs, campaign groups, interest groups (call them what you will) do. Their aims and the issues they take up vary widely – so patient groups that work on particular conditions are very different from national environmental organisations, for example. But typically they all look to open things up, put things in context, find quiet voices, amplify them and ensure that decisions are made in the interests of the many rather than the few. They prompt debate and action on issues. They force things into the public sphere. They encourage others to join them and they try to encourage those in power to look at things differently. In science and technology, such groups have been central in challenging the assumption that there is one correct, scientific way of looking at issues of public concern.

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NGOs derive their legitimacy in part from an implicit claim that what they do is in the public *interest*, even if they do not claim to represent public *opinion*, which is a complex and ambivalent thing. NGOs will often, as with Bob Geldof's Live 8 or Oxfam's call for a text-message petition, build up a mass of public support to add weight to their campaigns. However, in another sense, real public engagement gets in the way of what NGOs do. Interest groups are happiest when they are opposing something. But public engagement, if it is to work, asks for a more constructive, shared conversation about the future. This essay looks at the role that campaign groups have played in past attempts to engage members of the public in science, and suggests how, as we move 'upstream', NGOs might rethink their relationships to politics and the public.

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The argumentative NGO

The pattern of public engagement by NGOs might be understood in two ways. NGOs, as a part of civil society, engage themselves in science and technology issues. Frequently, single-issue groups are formed with the sole purpose of introducing a new message, a new point of view. They become part of the democratic process. Occasionally, as we saw with the development of treatments for HIV/AIDS, such groups become part of the scientific process.[1]

But NGOs also aim to mobilise other members of the public, asking for their support or at least their attention. A recent example is the involvement of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth in the GM controversy. Around MMR and the risks of mobile phones, we have seen the creation of specific single-interest groups – for example, JABS (Justice, Awareness and Basic Support) and Mast Action UK, respectively. These smaller interest groups, whose presence within their chosen issue belies their scant resources, are very much children of our time. The internet makes it easy to collect and publish information and to bring together interested people.

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LARKS AND OWLS

In 2004, members of the public were given the opportunity to discover how their own genes worked to shape their sleeping habits, gaining an insight into the molecular biology of circadian rhythms and, perhaps, an excuse to get more sleep.

'Lark or Owl?' was held in the 'Who Am I?' Gallery in the Science Museum, London. Participants were invited to fill out a seemingly simple questionnaire – actually a powerful research tool – about their attitudes to different times of the day. This resulted in a numerical score betraying details of their circadian type – whether they were a morning person (a 'lark') or an evening type (an 'owl'). →

Left: Late riser: it could be in the genes.

LARK OR OWL?

Funding
£31 093 (2004, People Award) – Engagement of the public in the discussion and investigation of the importance of the circadian body clock for diurnal preference and sleep–wake timing in modern society.

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More details
www.surrey.ac.uk/SBMS/lark-owl/

you see this as a good or a bad thing depends on your opinions of the issues. Most NGO involvement in science has come from the environmental movement. But interest groups from across the political spectrum have injected themselves into controversies around animal testing, abortion and creationism.

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Groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are a world away from the single-interest groups that form to oppose particular things, exist on a meagre diet of charity and tabloid stories, and frequently follow the public profile of their particular controversy into collapse. Since the 1970s, when environmental NGOs made their mark on science with campaigns around nuclear power, biodiversity and road-building, Greenpeace have expanded and grown closer both to traditional political processes and to orthodox science. This has led to their involvement in the new wave of public engagement initiatives. But what role do they play?

Building a conversation

The 21st century has seen an explosion in deliberative public engagement processes, all of which aim to generate some sort of dialogue between science (and the institutions that govern science) and members of the public. The motivation for these exercises might be to seek new perspectives with which to make better decisions. Or they might aim to create greater trust between science and the public. In either case, the purpose should be to explore, through conversation, new areas of what Demos calls "the public value of science".[2]

The most striking example of an official deliberative exercise was 'GM Nation?', staged in the summer of 2003. Created as part of a government attempt to understand and rethink its handling of the GM controversy, it consisted of a series of local and regional discussions. After successful campaigns to attract public attention to the GM issue, battle-weary NGOs were keen to be involved in a process that promised the ear of Government.

'GM Nation?' was new and high-profile. When its results were presented to the world, many of the nuances were lost. The public had seemingly come out with a 'not yet, if ever' verdict. This definitive outcome attracted criticism. The NGOs were accused of taking hold of the process, filling town halls and focus groups with Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth supporters.[3] So, according to the critics, 'GM Nation?' did not accurately take the pulse of the nation. Doug Parr, Greenpeace's chief scientist, looks back on 'GM Nation?' as the start of Government's move towards public engagement with science:

> I think it was a valuable exercise, although it was far too late...our take on it was a pretty cynical one. Government were forced into it...They held the 'GM Nation?' debate because they were losing the argument in a public forum...and it demonstrated that concerns about GM were widespread, well-informed and that they ran quite deep.[4]

Responding to the criticism that NGOs were overrepresented in the process, Parr argues that public engagement is about much more than representing public opinion:

> If you wanted to just find out what 'real' public opinion was, you could do an opinion poll and that would be much cheaper...It was also a political process. Just in the same way as it's a political process when people go out and vote. And when 60 per cent of the public turn out, we don't say, "Let's do some market research to find out what the other 40 per cent think and then decide what the real intentions of the public were"...the fact that people are prepared to spend an evening discussing these things is something of importance and political significance.

Upstream public engagement allows us to go beneath questions of technological benefit versus technological risk to the deeper question of "what kind of world do we want to live in?"

NGOs upstream

'GM Nation?' reminds us of one of the dangers of public engagement. If it is not done early enough, interests will be so well defined and positions so entrenched that any chance of constructive conversation is lost. This realisation is behind more recent moves towards 'upstream' public engagement. Demos, as an NGO of sorts (although not a campaigning one), has played a role in advocating earlier, broader, more productive dialogue about science and innovation. We argue that upstream public engagement allows us to go beneath questions of technological benefit versus technological risk to the deeper question of "what kind of world do we want to live in?"[5] For other NGOs, the move upstream, where science, interests and public opinion are all up for grabs, asks difficult questions of their own role. If we engage early, when the relationship between technology and society is still undefined, and there is a productive conversation to be had, how do NGOs shape their positions and their place in debates? In the last two years, a few have been experimenting with deliberative engagement to answer this question.

Practical Action (formerly the Intermediate Technology Development Group) is an NGO with an interest in technology and developing countries. Drawing on the inspiration of their founder, E F Schumacher, they campaign for the empowerment and involvement of local people in decisions about the

→ So far, a standard scientific survey. But Dr Simon Archer was specifically interested in the extremes – the 10 per cent of the population with the most skewed daily rhythms. The people inhabiting these extremes were offered the opportunity to have their own DNA analysed, to engage in a real-time course of research and seek out the specific genetic reasons for their day-worshipping or nocturnal existences.

You don't get much more personal than having your very own DNA analysed – with sampling carried out in the Science Museum itself. Dr Archer and his team subtly demystified the process, revealing why and how it works with a very real, direct approach. There is a genuine possibility those who subjected themselves to analysis will never see their body in the same light again, while also gaining a deeper understanding of what goes on behind closed laboratory doors.

This was possibly the first time in their lives many people had given thought to the underlying biology at the heart of their body clock. By alerting people to their own natural cycles, the scientists set in motion a gentle cultural awakening, asking people to consider how they live their lives – from when they go to bed to what kind of job they're more suited to.

The project received considerable media attention, helping to spread the message still further. By increasing public awareness of circadian biology and exploring how variations in day/night preference and sleep timing can be influenced by circadian clock genes, →

Right: Space at the Science Museum for the 'Lark or Owl?' study. *S Archer*

technologies that they use and that impact upon them. Through recent experiments with citizens' juries, they have sought to bring political attention to people and viewpoints that conventional politics would find it easy to ignore. One citizens' jury, in Zimbabwe, allowed a group of farmers to provide recommendations to the Zimbabwean Government that covered a range of current and future concerns, from the provision of water, finance and education, through HIV/AIDS, to GM crops.[6,7]

Greenpeace and other environmental NGOs operate in a political environment that is much clearer to Western audiences. They must fit deliberative public engagement into their everyday activities of arguing, campaigning and mobilising members of the public. In 2005, Greenpeace initiated a deliberative public engagement process on nanotechnology – the science of the very small. The Nanojury, following Greenpeace's earlier GM jury, was made up of ten sessions run over five weeks.[8] It took 20 members of the public and a collection of expert witnesses through a discussion of the opportunities and uncertainties that lay ahead. The process was an experiment in deliberative democracy – giving a small group of people the chance to have their say in debates about new technologies. But Greenpeace also had a more direct motive for starting such a process. Robin Grove-White, a leading social scientist and former chair of Greenpeace's board, admits that, with NGOs, "everything they do is instrumental," directly serving their campaign purposes. For Doug Parr, the purpose of the Nanojury was to:

> ...expose some of the myths behind the rejection of public and NGOs' scepticism about new technology...here are a load of ordinary people off the street, exposed to a balanced set of experts, and come to some conclusion. In no way could they be described as ill-informed or prejudiced. Yet if they're still coming to conclusions that are broadly supportive of our [Greenpeace's] views, then clearly the mythology in Government and scientific institutions about why there's such a worry about new technology can be seen as misplaced...

At the time of the Nanojury, Greenpeace's position on nanotechnology suggested a new approach. Following an attention-grabbing report from a Canadian-based NGO, the ETC group,[9] which called for a moratorium on the commercialisation of new nanotechnologies, Greenpeace took up a sceptical but balanced stance, arguing that while there are important concerns and uncertainties under the nanotechnology umbrella, there are also promises of sustainable technologies that need to be encouraged to materialise.[10] In a world in which early public engagement is officially endorsed, it is interesting to see NGOs taking subtler, more constructive positions on emerging issues.

Also connect

The relationship between NGOs and public engagement is complex. NGOs are a crucial part of civil society. They act to hold governments and others to account, in what they guess is the public interest. But they would rarely claim to represent public opinion. And, as we have seen with recent attempts to engage members of the public in upstream dialogue about technology, it is not at all clear what public opinion is. So public engagement – if it is done properly, with the intention of opening up debates, exploring alternative viewpoints and connecting people to politics – has the potential to be just as disruptive to the work of NGOs as to Government.

With official recognition of arguments about sustainability, large NGOs became insiders, playing governmental politics. NGOs now need to consider therefore whether their own narrow views of scientific and technological issues are engaged with public values. In the next decade, as public engagement becomes the norm across a range of areas, large NGOs might consider how they can use its potential to re-energise their work. This might involve more deliberative experiments like those by Greenpeace, or connecting with smaller, community-based groups who are looking to build public interest from the bottom up.

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Acknowledgements

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References

1 See Epstein S. Impure Science: AIDS, activism, and the politics of knowledge. Berkeley, California: University of California Press; 1996.

2 Wilsdon J et al. The Public Value of Science. London: Demos; 2005.

3 See, for one example: Campbell C. A genetically modified survey. Spiked 2004 11 August. www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CA661.htm [accessed 5 June 2006].

4 Interview with Doug Parr, 30 March 2006.

5 Wilsdon J, Willis R. See-Through Science. London: Demos; 2004.

6 Coupe S et al. A Farmers' Jury – The future of smallholder agriculture in Zimbabwe. Rugby: ITDG Publishing; 2005.

7 Rusike E. Exploring food and farming futures in Zimbabwe: a citizens' jury and scenario workshop experiment. In M Leach et al. (eds). Science and Citizens. London: Zed Books; 2005. pp. 249–55.

8 See www.nanojury.org and www.gmjury.org.

9 The Big Down – Atomtech: Technologies converging at the nanoscale. ETC Group; 2003. www.etcgroup.org/documents/thebigdown.pdf [accessed 5 June 2006].

10 Arnall AH. Future Technologies, Today's Choices. London: Greenpeace Environmental Trust; 2003. www.greenpeace.org.uk/MultimediaFiles/Live/FullReport/5886.pdf [accessed 5 June 2006].

→ the project raised interesting questions about society's tendency to cultural homogenisation, such as the ubiquitous '9 to 5'.

'Lark or Owl?' was genuinely novel and innovative. It showed a complete picture: the fusion of interactivity and public participation, demonstrating scientific methodology, with the real-world implications of its findings. With so much science depending on public involvement, projects such as this can give everyone a much clearer picture of what actually happens in biomedical research.

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Right: Wake-up call: people may benefit from understanding their personal circadian rhythms.